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## Nays have it on oil lease sales

by Sepp Jannotta  
Staff Writer

"Please, go away."

This was the simple plea from one of the nearly 70 Homer-area residents who voiced their feelings during the Jan. 23 hearing on oil development in lower Cook Inlet.

The hearing provided the public its chance to weigh in on a pair of oil and gas lease sales proposed by the federal Minerals Management Service. As has become the custom, the Homer crowd gave an earful to the federal officials running the meeting. Testimony ran so late that Michael McGuire ordered up pizzas to pass around.



□ Photo by Sepp Jannotta, Homer News  
Protestors line the street outside Homer to last week's oil and gas lease sale hearing.

By the night's end, the crowd of 250 or so that gathered in the Homer High School commons nearly unanimous opposition -- just three speakers backed the lease sales -- to the plan which open up 2.5 million acres between Kalgin and Shuyak islands.

The proposed Outer Continental Shelf sales -- lease sale 191 would take place in 2004 and lease 199 is slated for 2006 -- have ignited the latest skirmish in a fight that Homer activists have waged close to 30 years. (See related story, Page 1.)

Many of those who testified expressed exasperation that the Minerals Management Service is pushing for oil development in lower Cook Inlet. In a 1995 Homer hearing that drew close to 400 people, the MMS received a resounding "no" in testimony regarding Lease Sale 149.

"How many times do we have to say, 'No, we don't want it?'" Yvonne Prucha asked.

A key argument for oil lease opponents was the MMS draft environmental impact statement's estimate of a one-in-five chance of a large oil spill (anything larger than 1,000 barrels) should a site be approved for producing. Spills up to 1,000 barrels are considered fairly routine for offshore drilling rigs.

Dale Banks, a volunteer coordinator with Cook Inlet Keeper, wondered how well a batch of oil might sell if buyers were aware that there was a 20 percent chance of a "spill."

Though the humorous analogy had much of the room belly laughing, the concept of an oil spill in lower Cook Inlet was a deadly serious threat to nearly everyone who sat before the microphone. The mercurial, crude oil-streaked Prince William Sound and rafts of oil hitting the Kenai coastlines were invoked.

Alan Parks, a longtime commercial fisherman from Homer, said a spill in lower Cook Inlet would be a nail in the coffin for commercial fishing in the region.

Parks testified that he'd been preparing his boat to fish herring in Prince William Sound in 1998.

learned that the Exxon Valdez had run aground on Bligh Reef.

By the time people realized that 11 million gallons of crude oil had spilled in the sound, it was the herring season would be cancelled, Parks said.

"We haven't fished herring in Prince William Sound since," he added.

Several people raised the question of why people should trust the oil industry when ExxonMo dragging the punitive damages settlement through the courts after 13 years.

Tom Evans of Nanwalek said the Native people of his village had even less faith in the government bureaucrats that had drafted what he called an unintelligible document explaining potential environmental impacts.

"We can't understand it," he said. "How do we know if you're being fair and honest with us?"

Evans said that his village, which relies heavily on subsistence foods, had seen its resources damaged by the Exxon Valdez spill. "Today, our resources have not recovered."

Dave Lion sat down in front of the microphone and said he would basically repeat his 1995 testimony. "This is a bad idea for commercial fishing in Alaska."

He added the only money he and his friends would be likely to make from oil development in the area would be getting "paid a whole lot of money to clean it up."

Many people testified that the lower Cook Inlet region's notoriously rough weather and power as well as its earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes -- make drilling here too risky.

Historically, a Homer oil lease hearing can be almost as threatening an environment for the MMS staffs that bring the proposals before the public.

"This time it was a kinder, gentler 'No, we don't want leases,'" said Robin Cacy, an MMS public officer. "It's an emotional topic, and people tend to get emotional about it either for or against."

MMS regional director John Goll said that the concerns brought up during local input sessions were important in shaping the draft environmental impact statement. Goll said issues that received attention were: water quality (though "zero discharge" of platform drilling wastes is still not fully mandated); subsistence; money for local spill response; and potential conflicts with fishing gear.

Where possible, the use of pipelines would be encouraged over tankers to minimize the risk of a spill.

Two tracts, one near the Barren Islands and one off the tip of the peninsula, would be considered for removal from the sale.

"And we will evaluate not having the sale," Goll said.

Goll said that, due to a shortage in Southcentral Alaska, natural gas would probably be the primary focus of any exploration. He added that he could not rule out oil drilling. Much of the product is marketed locally, Goll said.

When asked point blank if he believed drilling could be done without harming the environment, he thought with current technology it probably could be done safely.

Kathy Toms, the Anchor Point Chamber of Commerce president, said she believed that drilling

not hurt the environment.

More importantly, Toms said, she believed oil and gas exploration would create much-needed higher-paying jobs in the area. Anchor Point experienced a mini boom during a brief flurry of test drilling last winter (more is on tap for this year).

But it is the boom economy that some opponents fear most.

Homer area resident Craig Phillips, who was born in Kenai, suggested that the oil industry has hurt the town he grew up in.

Many opponents simply said they see oil development as incompatible with tourism and fishing economies that make Homer tick. Spill or no spill, sport fishermen don't pay good money to travel to Alaska to go out halibut fishing or trolling for salmon next to an oil rig, they said.

All of this boils down to uppity "not in my back yard" thinking in the eyes of some of the pro-oil who testified at an MMS hearing in Kenai on Saturday.

There, the overwhelming majority said they support the sales because oil industry jobs are crucial to the economic health of the Kenai Peninsula, although the MMS has stated that the proposed lease would bring no new jobs to the area. The Kenai Peninsula Borough has stated that it is also opposed.

Kenai resident Ricky Gease -- saying he was responding to comments from Homer residents that he was a white trash bag and sang the "White Trash Blues" as part of his testimony. Gease said he simply wanted to show support for the peninsula's "white trash industry."

Gease -- who holds a master's degree in marine biology from Stanford University -- also blasted opponents for saying oil drilling in the inlet will have a negative impact on its ecosystem.

"I eat about 200 salmon a year," Gease said. "These (Kenai) fish are not contaminated, and I don't see any health warnings on our Kenai Wild fish," Gease said.

At the Homer meeting, water taxi operator and former commercial fisherman Mako Haggerty said his "nimby" concept was bunk. Haggerty said his job depends on there not being oil rigs up and down the inlet.

"What about my job?"

Additional testimony on the proposed lease sales 191 and 199 can be submitted to Minerals Management Service in writing until Feb. 11. Comments should be sent to: Regional Director MMS Alaska OCS Region, 949 E. 36th Ave., Rm 308, Anchorage, AK 99508-4363.

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